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Minorities are 50% of Westchester's kids 5-9

Tim Henderson. The Journal News. White Plains, N.Y.: Jun 14, 2010.

Abstract (Summary)

Tarrytown, Port Chester, Yonkers and White Plains have the highest levels of English-challenged students, but it's climbing fastest in Peekskill, where it's risen threefold to 15 percent of students in this decade, according to data from the Westchester Children's Association.

Full Text (566 words)

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It's official -- Westchester's first majority-minority generation is now ready to enter the schools.

New census estimates show that half of all 5- to 9-year-olds in the county are minorities -- the first New York suburb to see that milestone, mostly because of continuing Hispanic growth.

The rest of the Lower Hudson Valley is also seeing more diversity in the youngest school-age children, one-third minority in Rockland and one-fifth in Putnam.

It's a national trend -- USA Today reported births around the U.S. are nearing half-minority.

In Westchester, Port Chester's John F. Kennedy Magnet School is about 80 percent Hispanic.

"It used to be all Italian and Irish. Now I'm the minority," said Debbie Carroll, who has a 9-year-old at the school. "I don't mind, as long as it's an excellent school with (an) excellent curriculum -- and it is."

Ismela Rodriguez, who has a 7-year-old in the school, said education is better and more freely available here than in her native El Salvador.

"In some ways life is harder here. In my country, there was more time to dedicate to the children," Rodriguez said in Spanish. "Here, there's less time because you have to work. But at least there's a good school where she can learn. She knows both languages (Spanish and English), written and spoken now."

Parents said most immigrant children learn English well enough to join mainstream classrooms by third grade, and bilingual classes have become less necessary. Tarrytown, Port Chester, Yonkers and White Plains have the highest levels of English-challenged students, but it's climbing fastest in Peekskill, where it's risen threefold to 15 percent of students in this decade, according to data from the Westchester Children's Association.

The challenge for schools may be more about sheer numbers and overcoming cultural obstacles to parental involvement.

John F. Kennedy needs three buildings on two campuses, and is seeking a fourth to accommodate its soaring student population, which has reached 300 for kindergarten and first grade alone.

Sometimes parents from Latin American countries need more coaxing to get involved in school activities, said Lisa Davis, director of the Westchester-Putnam School Boards Association.

For one thing, many parents like Rodriguez are working long hours to pay for the high cost of living in Westchester. In other countries, parental involvement may not be the norm, Davis said.

"There are cultures where you wouldn't insert yourself into the schools or become active in a way that we often expect," Davis said. "We think it's very important for administrators, finding ways to bridge that cultural gap."

To that end, Elba Montalvo of the Committee for Hispanic Children and Families spoke to Hispanic parents recently at a conference hosted by Manhattanville College. She stressed the importance of preparing young children for school by involving them in activities and speaking to them, even if it's in Spanish.

"The concepts are the same, whether it's English or Spanish," said Montalvo, who arrived in the U.S. from Puerto Rico as a small child and struggled to learn English in school. "I told them, 'You're the child's first teacher. You can develop their reading and math skills if you share with your kids -- like with cooking, you can talk about the measurements in the recipe.'"

Overall, Westchester is 40 percent minority, the highest percentage of any New York suburban county, according to the 2009 estimates based on administrative records like births and deaths.

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